THE WRITING LIFE

KEN KESEY'S NEW BAND OF MERRY READERS

Talk to Ken Kesey for awhile about writing, and you almost forget he's been a literary outsider for more than a quarter century.

Perhaps as well-known for being the central character in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which chronicled his exploits as the leader of a band of proto-hippies known as the Merry Pranksters, as he is for being the author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*, Kesey has spent the better part of the past three decades engaged in "living" his books rather than committing them to paper.

When he *has* committed words to paper, from his farm in the wet hills of Oregon's Willamette Valley, the results have been surprises: *Caverns*, a mystery written in collaboration with the graduate class he taught at the University of Oregon a few years ago; *A Further Inquiry*, a rejected-screenplay-turned-book in which he puts the Merry Pranksters on trial; and two children's books, *Little Tricker the Squirrel Meets Big Double the Bear* and *The Sea Lion*, both of which he now frequently "performs" for young audiences around the country.

"I'm real certain of my kids' books," Kesey says. "I've read them and performed them enough to know that this is a working piece of stuff. You're not telling stories that are meant to explore the psychological depths of a character, you're just trying to tell a story, like Poe or Zane Gray, and that's just so much more interesting to me. It's hard to be certain of a novel. They're so vast. But with a kid's story, the kids you're reading to, they don't know you from Ralph Waldo Emerson. They've never heard of Tom Wolfe, they've barely heard of the Grateful Dead [in whose legacy Kesey is also inextricably linked], so if the story can't stand up on its own, no amount of posturing or critic's praise is going to change it in a kid's mind."

Kesey is, to put it mildly, a pure distillation of the child within the man. This is never more evident than when he's performing his stories for children. Last October, for example, he ventured to West Harlem to read *The Sea Lion* to an audience of kids bused in by local church groups and homeless centers. In full costume, Kesey the actor-cum-shaman used magic tricks, slides and audience participation to flesh out a show in which he played all the parts. This theatricality, he says, is the shape of literature—particularly children's literature—to come.

"Writing really doesn't happen until it connects with the mind of the reader. I think we're getting into a time in which we can call the reader the viewer. If we don't confront the reader as viewer, we're going to lose a lot [of them].

"Gus Van Zandt, the [director of] *Drugstore Cowboy*, was here last week with his film crew to shoot me while I performed *The Sea Lion*, and to me, that is the real publication of it, more than the book. The book will be there and one thing doesn't preclude the other, but a performance is so much better and so much more fun for the artist as well as the viewer. You [begin a] novel, and you can just cross yourself off for about two years of being worth living with. [Laughs] It's corrosive work—and not just on you, but on everyone around you. You find yourself in the morning kicking the dog, throwing things at the cat, screaming at the parrot.

"Television has changed everything so enormously that [publishing] will never be the same, and for us in the writing world to bemoan the fact—that's like complaining about the last hurricane to hit Florida. There's nothing you can do about it but try and live after it. You have to compete with Big Bird, and you have to compete with Cosby. You have to compete with all of the car chases and the gun shootings and low cleavages that are just there constantly in front of the viewers' minds. And if you try to do it with all of the old stuff that used to catch attention, you'll find yourself left in the cold. If Shakespeare were working today, he would be trying to work in what is the most popular and exciting and juicy form, which would be like MTV. Because whether you're a writer or a dancer or a filmmaker, the greatest sin that you can commit is boredom. My dad told me a thing once that I've always remembered: Good writing ain't necessarily good reading. He always emphasized to be sure that what you're writing is something that people will enjoy reading."

—Danny McCue

Ken Kesey

MY FIRST CONVERT

In my bookstore in Rising Star, Texas, I sell paperbacks of all types. Yet, the category romance section is my busiest shelf.

One day, a customer came in looking for a book, and waved a dismissive hand at the romances.

"I never read those," she said with a sneer. "They aren't creative."

I didn't mention that I wrote romance novels. "You don't think they are creative at all?"

"Not at all. They're all alike. They're completely predictable. I'm an artist. I value creativity above everything."

"An artist? Do you paint?"

"Yes. Oils, acrylics, watercolor. Just about everything."

"What if I gave you an assignment?"

"To paint what?"

"Anything," I told her. "But each painting must have only three things in it: a barn, a tree and some flowers."

"But you said *anything*. That isn't anything."

"Isn't it? How many different types